



ŚRĪ NĀMĀṢṬAKAM

THE GLORIES OF THE HOLY NAME

What Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī Reveals

A Verse-by-Verse Reflection on Nāmāṣṭakam from Śrī Rūpa Gosvāmī's Stavamālā



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Preface: The First Poem of Stavamālā

Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī's Stavamālā is one of his leading works — a collection of devotional prayers and stavas. Significantly, the very first poem of Stavamālā is Nāmāṣṭakam, through which Rūpa Gosvāmī establishes a profound principle: all emotions, glorification, and spiritual perfection connected with Kṛṣṇa manifest from His holy name.

The sequence of Stavamālā is itself deeply meaningful. Nāmāṣṭakam is followed by three Caitanyāṣṭakams, and then by glorifications of Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā, Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, and finally Rādhā's viraha. Rūpa Gosvāmī has arranged these prayers systematically, beginning with the holy name — because everything else unfolds from the name.

This is precisely why Śrīmad Bhāgavatam declares:

etan nirvidyamānānām icchatām akuto-bhayam

yoginām nṛpa nirṇītaṁ harer nāmānukīrtanam

Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 2.1.11

The ultimate aim is to spread the glories of Kṛṣṇa 's name throughout the universe.

Nāmāṣṭakam consists of eight verses. Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa wrote a commentary upon it, and Śrīla Prabhupāda repeatedly quoted its first and sixth verses in his own commentaries and talks. The following pages offer a verse-by-verse reflection on this extraordinary prayer, unfolding its philosophy, its challenge to impersonalism, and its promise to every soul, however fallen, who takes shelter of the holy name.

Verse One — The Holy Name Is the Essence of the Upaniṣads

nikhila-śruti-mauli-ratna-mālā-dyuti-nīrājita-pāda-paṅkajānta

ayi mukta-kulair upāsyamānam paritas tvām hari-nāma samśrayāmi

Rūpa Gosvāmī begins Nāmāṣṭakam with a powerful statement: all the Upaniṣads worship the holy name of Kṛṣṇa .

The expression nikhila-śruti-mauli-ratna-mālā indicates the entire body of the Upaniṣads — the crest jewels of revealed knowledge. They worship the divine radiance emanating from the lotus feet of Kṛṣṇa 's holy name.

The Vedas speak of many subjects — yajña, dāna, tapa, dhyāna, and countless other spiritual practices. But the Upaniṣads ultimately direct us toward the essence: the holy name of Kṛṣṇa . There is nothing equal to it.

Sanātana Gosvāmī reaches a similar conclusion in Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta. He describes an assembly in heaven in which the personified Purāṇas, Vedas, Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, and others each claimed superiority. Ultimately, Śrīmad Bhāgavatam established its supremacy by proclaiming:

yan-nāmadheya-śravaṇānukīrtanād yat-prahvaṇād yat-smaraṇād api kvacit

śvādo 'pi sadyaḥ savanāya kalpate kutaḥ punas te bhagavan nu darśanāt

Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 3.33.6

The message is unmistakable: the aim of life is to take Kṛṣṇa 's name as much as possible before leaving the body. Everything else is temporary — the holy name is the only wealth that accompanies us when we depart.

The Holy Name and the Essence of the Upaniṣads

Rūpa Gosvāmī also challenges the Māyāvāda interpretation in the very opening line. If the essence of the Upaniṣads were simply nirākāra brahma — impersonal Brahman — then the worship of the lotus feet of the holy name would have no meaning. But Rūpa Gosvāmī establishes that the essence of the Upaniṣads is Bhagavān's name, and this implies that Kṛṣṇa has a form: Śyāmasundara.

According to Śaṅkarācārya, the essence of the Upaniṣads is nirākāra brahma. The Māyāvādīs will not accept our conception, and we need not concern ourselves with whatever they do. Rūpa Gosvāmī has made his own position clear.

But the verse does not stop there. Rūpa Gosvāmī writes:

ayi mukta-kulair upāśyamānaṁ — "Even liberated souls worship the holy name of Bhagavān."

This is confirmed by Śrīmad Bhāgavatam:

*ātmārāmāś ca munayo nirgranthā apy urukrame
kurvanty ahaitukīm bhaktim ittham-bhūta-guṇo hariḥ
Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 1.7.10*

The ātmārāmas, munis, and ṛṣis glorify Bhagavān Hari. In Satya-yuga, the recommended process was dhyāna-yoga; yet after perfecting control of the mind through meditation, the dhyānīs themselves would turn to worship the holy name.

This glorification of God's name is not confined to a single tradition. The Bible, too, says, "Hallowed be Thy name," and the Old Testament likewise instructs one to take God 's name. The Jews considered God's name so sacred and tremendous that they felt themselves unqualified even to pronounce it. Over time, the practice of taking Kṛṣṇa s name was largely forgotten.

Rūpa Gosvāmī's phrase ayi mukta-kulair upāśyamānaṁ therefore carries a further philosophical implication: both in the conditioned state and in the liberated state, the holy name remains worthy of worship. This directly challenges the Māyāvāda idea that after liberation the individual soul and Paramātmā become one, leaving no further need for devotional worship. Rūpa Gosvāmī glorifies the holy name and, in the same breath, refutes that conception.

He then makes the most personal statement of the verse:

paritas tvām hari-nāma saṁśrayāmi — "I take complete shelter of You, O holy name of Hari."

Mahāprabhu instructed us to take Kṛṣṇa 's name somehow or other — while eating, sleeping, sitting, standing, or walking:

*khāite śuite yathā tathā nāma laya
Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Antya-līlā 20.18*

We should therefore practice chanting constantly. Then the holy name itself begins to guide us along the path of bhakti.

Verse Two — Everyone Is Qualified to Chant

Once we understand that liberated souls worship the holy name, a natural question arises: if only liberated souls worship it, why should the holy name manifest on the tongues of sinful people like us? Rūpa Gosvāmī answers this in the second verse.

jaya nāmadheya muni-vṛnda-geya jana-rañjanāya param akṣarākṛte

tvam anādarād api manāk udīritam nikhilogra-tāpa-pāṭalīm vilumpasi

The munis, ṛṣis, yogīs, and tapasvīs all glorify Bhagavān's name. Some glorify it through speech; others glorify it within their hearts, in samādhi, experiencing profound bliss. That bliss of samādhi cannot ordinarily be seen from without. But Mahāprabhu manifested this inner ocean of bliss externally — through dance, saṅkīrtana, and His teachings.

The Name Is Not Different from Kṛṣṇa

Rūpa Gosvāmī says that Kṛṣṇa manifests in the form of letters — param akṣarākṛte. The letters of Hare Kṛṣṇa, and the sound Hare Kṛṣṇa, are not ordinary. If someone repeatedly says "water, water," thirst will not disappear. But when we chant Hare Kṛṣṇa with pure consciousness, the thirst of the ātmā, accumulated over countless lifetimes, can be quenched.

Why? Because Bhagavān's name is Bhagavān Himself. This is the fundamental principle of the holy name: there is no difference between nāma and nāmī. Kṛṣṇa gives ānanda through His holy name — the nāma-avatāra. Śrīla Bhakti Siddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura used to refer to the holy name as Nāma Prabhu. Bhagavān has appeared in various incarnations — Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Vāmana, and so many others — but in Kali-yuga He has appeared as the Nāma-avatāra.

Even One Chant Can Destroy Mountains of Sin

Rūpa Gosvāmī then makes an extraordinary statement: tvam anādarād api manāk udīritam nikhilogra-tāpa-pāṭalīm vilumpasi — even if someone takes Bhagavān's name without respect, even once, the holy name can destroy mountains of terrible sin.

Why is this possible? Only sinful people take the holy name without proper respect, yet even then the name possesses such power that it can burn away enormous quantities of sin. The example is simple: a single spark, not a great fire, is enough to burn a mountain of cotton.

Sins are described as pāpa and mahā-pāpa. Among the mahā-pāpas are drinking liquor, killing a brāhmaṇa, maintaining an illicit relationship with another's wife or with the guru's wife, and stealing another person's wealth. These are not abstract problems — drinking, stealing, and illicit relationships are very much visible in present-day society.

Why, Then, Are Our Sins Not Destroyed?

If the holy name has such power, why are our sins not destroyed despite our chanting?

The answer is simple: we do not have faith in the holy name. The śāstras state that if one chants with faith — with the conviction that the name can make the impossible possible — then even if someone tells a mountain to jump into the sea, it will jump. The śāstras, including the Bible, speak of the extraordinary power of faith, even the power to bring the dead back to life. This confronts us with an uncomfortable truth: perhaps we do not possess even a fraction of the faith we claim to have.

There is an incident concerning Jāhnavā-devī, the śakti of Nityānanda Prabhu, from her time in Vṛndāvana. The Vrajavāsīs were distressed because a boy of Vṛndāvana had passed away. Jāhnavā-devī touched the boy's head and chanted Hare Kṛṣṇa, and the boy came back to life. When the Vrajavāsīs asked how this was possible, she replied that it was nothing extraordinary, for by the power of Kṛṣṇa's name millions could be brought back to life. Whether or not one accepts the historical incident, the message is unmistakable: we must develop faith in the holy name.

A traditional story makes the same point. When Lord Rāma defeated Rāvaṇa and returned to India, Vibhīṣaṇa requested that the Rāma-setu bridge be broken, fearing that demons might use it to invade again. Lord Rāma broke the bridge. Later, some of Vibhīṣaṇa's friends, unable to fly, needed to cross the ocean. Vibhīṣaṇa gave them a piece of paper bearing a mantra and told them to hold it tightly and walk across the water. They began walking — but midway, curiosity overtook them. They opened their hands and saw that only the name Rāma had been written on the paper. Doubt arose as to whether the name could truly hold such power, and the moment their faith disappeared, they sank into the ocean.

Whether or not this incident occurred exactly as told, the message is clear: we lack faith. To the extent that we have faith, we experience the result. Therefore Rūpa Gosvāmī says, nikhilograta-pāṭalīm vilumpasi — the holy name destroys the greatest suffering and the greatest sins. We must chant with the faith that through God's name, the impossible becomes possible. Even conquering death appears impossible in this world; yet one who truly takes shelter of the holy name does not ultimately die.

No Qualification Is Required for Bhakti

This verse also establishes a revolutionary principle: everyone is qualified to chant the holy name. It does not matter how sinful one may be — sin is not a disqualification for chanting.

Rūpa Gosvāmī is again challenging the conception attributed to Śaṅkarācārya, that one must first become sinless and qualified before worshipping Brahman. The bhakti process is different; it does

not begin by demanding that we first become perfect. On the path of jñāna, one requires jñāna, vairāgya, and the various good qualities known as ṣaṭ-sampatti. Śaṅkarācārya himself wrote:

bhaja govindam bhaja govindam govindam bhaja mūḍha-mate

samprāpte sannihite kāle nahi nahi rakṣati ḍukṛñ-karaṇe

We quote this verse, but we do not accept the interpretation sometimes given — that those who cannot pursue the path of jñāna, cannot learn Sanskrit, or cannot undertake philosophical study should simply take to bhakti as a lesser alternative. That is not Rūpa Gosvāmī's conception. Bhakti is not a path reserved for the intellectually incapable; infact, Udhava visiting the Gopis in Srimad Bhagavatam ,illustrate that d ry intellectual knowledge ultimately finds its fulfillment and surrender in sponatenous love of pure devotion.

Verse Three — The Holy Name Does More Than Destroy Sin

If the holy name destroys unlimited sins, is that all it does?

Mukti cannot merely mean the destruction of sin — destruction is a negative effect. Naturally, we want to know: what is the positive result of chanting the holy name?

Once Nimāi Paṇḍit asked Gadādhara Paṇḍit for the definition of mukti. Gadādhara Paṇḍit quoted Patañjali's Yoga-sūtra: atyāntika-duḥkha-nivṛtti — mukti means the complete destruction of all suffering. Nimāi accepted the definition, but said it was incomplete: there must also be a positive dimension. It is not enough that suffering disappears; one must experience happiness. This is the deeper message of the third verse.

yad-ābhāso 'py udyan kavalita-bhava-dhvānta-vibhavo

dṛśaṁ tattvāndhanam api diśati bhakti-praṇayinīm

janas tasyodāttam jagati bhagavan-nāma-taraṇe

kṛtī te nirvaktum ka iha mahimānam prabhavati

Rūpa Gosvāmī says that even an unconscious or indirect appearance of the holy name can begin to awaken the feelings for Bhagavān that lie hidden within the heart. The holy name can act even when we do not fully understand what we are doing. Śrīmad Bhāgavatam confirms this:

sāṅketyaṁ pārihāsyam vā stobhaṁ helanam eva vā

vaikuṇṭha-nāma-grahaṇam aśeṣāgha-haram viduḥ

Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 6.2.14

One may utter the holy name indirectly, jokingly, disrespectfully, or even while referring to something else. Someone may see devotees and say, "O Hare Kṛṣṇa people" — sāṅketyam. Someone may chant the name while mocking devotees, or use it while abusing them — helanam. Yet the holy name begins to act. It does not wait for our philosophical understanding before beginning its work.

The Holy Name Opens the Door to Bhakti

There are people who may be blind to philosophy or śāstra, yet if they take the holy name with even a little faith, the holy name begins to direct them toward prema. Rūpa Gosvāmī writes, dṛśaṁ tattvāndhanam api diśati bhakti-praṇayinīm — the holy name can guide even one who is blind to deeper philosophical truth toward the path of devotion. If someone takes the name without proper understanding, but with even a little sincere effort, the doors of mukti begin to open.

There is an important point, however: when the door opens, one must still walk through it. Nothing can be accomplished while the door remains closed, but once Kṛṣṇa's name opens it, we must make the effort to cross the threshold. Kṛṣṇa reveals everything within the hearts of sincere devotees:

dadāmi buddhi-yogaṁ taṁ yena mām upayānti te

Bhagavad-gītā 10.10

This does not mean we should abandon the study of śāstra and simply chant. We cannot realistically take the name twenty-four hours a day; therefore we must hear, study, chant, and bring the mind under control. The holy name reveals everything and ultimately brings the mind under control — but because we do not take the name properly, sincere effort remains necessary.

Nevertheless, the underlying philosophy remains: with the holy name, the impossible becomes possible. This is the glory Rūpa Gosvāmī attributes to Kṛṣṇa's name — No past is too dark for the power of Holy name.

As the traditional teaching declares:

kali-yuga kevala nāma-adhāra

sumiri sumiri nara utariṇ pāra

In Kali-yuga, the holy name is the essential shelter.

How Do We Develop Faith in the Holy Name?

How can we develop faith in the holy name?

One answer is association with sādhus — those who themselves possess deep faith in the holy name; their faith influences us when we associate with them. But there is another, equally powerful method: keep chanting. Mahāprabhu instructed us to take the holy name repeatedly, and through continuous chanting, faith itself begins to develop. Chanting does not merely require faith — chanting also creates faith. The holy name itself lifts us; it gives us the qualification to advance and ultimately grants us bhakti-rasa.

This is why Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura established the Nāma-haṭṭa — the marketplace of the holy name — where we receive both the qualification to take the holy name and the holy name itself. That is the extraordinary gift of the holy name.

Verse Four — The Holy Name and Prārabdha Karma

yad-brahma-sākṣāt-kṛti-niṣṭayāpi vināśam āyāti vinā na bhogaiḥ

apaiti nāma-sphuraṇena tat te prārabdha-karma iti vairauti vedah

In the fourth verse, Rūpa Gosvāmī turns to the brahmavādīs, who meditate on Brahman and follow the path of jñāna-yoga. Above the earth lie the planetary systems of Bhuvar, Svar, Mahar, Jana, Tapa, and Satya; Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta mentions that such brahmavādīs reside in Tapo-loka. As described in Nectar of Devotion, the four Kumāras were previously brahmavādīs, and Śukadeva Gosvāmī is also described as having externally been a brahmavādī before later themselves becoming devotee of Lord Kṛṣṇa.

The brahmavādīs meditate on Brahman and remain absorbed in samādhi for many years, yet even this does not necessarily destroy their prārabdha karma.

Rūpa Gosvāmī describes four types of sinful reaction: prārabdha, aprārabdha, kūṭa, and bīja. Prārabdha is the karma whose reactions one is experiencing now; aprārabdha refers to suffering soon to come; kūṭa refers to the psychological tendency to commit sin in the future, born of habit; and bīja refers to the very seed-desire to sin. Desire transforms into tendency, and tendency becomes will.

Karma-yoga, jñāna-yoga, and dhyāna-yoga cannot completely relieve one from all prārabdha karma — vināśam āyāti vinā na bhogaiḥ, it must ordinarily be experienced through its reactions. These processes can free one from aprārabdha, kūṭa, and, to some extent, bīja, but not necessarily from prārabdha. Followers of Gorakhnātha, Aghorīs, Māyāvādīs, and Jains likewise accept that prārabdha karma takes time to exhaust.

But Rūpa Gosvāmī makes a remarkable claim: by the manifestation of the holy name, even prārabdha karma and bīja, the desire to do sin can be eradicated. Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura and Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa explain in their commentaries that sphuraṇena refers to pure chanting — śuddha-nāma:

sevonmukhe hi jihvādau svayam eva sphuraty adaḥ

Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Antya-līlā 17.136

There is, however, an important qualification: prārabdha karma is completely destroyed only if the holy name itself desires it. Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura therefore sings, kṛṣṇa-nāma icchā-moy, jahe jahe sukhi hoy — "I am satisfied with whatever the holy name desires." Ideally, the pure name can destroy all prārabdha karma, but this ultimately depends upon the desire of the holy name; Kṛṣṇa may not wish to free us from a particular reaction because allowing us to experience it may itself be for our benefit.

At present, most of us are at the stage of *nāmābhāsa*. Technically, even *nāmābhāsa* is powerful enough to destroy *prārabdha* karma. In *Bhakti-tattva-viveka*, Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura describes two stages of *nāmābhāsa* — complete and incomplete. Our own *nāmābhāsa* is generally incomplete: foggy and hazy, with something visible and something still hidden. This is why we continue to experience *prārabdha* karma, though Bhagavān can free us from it whenever He desires, and may also allow it to continue to make us humble, to break our *ahaṅkāra*, or for some other purpose planned entirely for our benefit.

When Karma Comes Under Bhagavān's Control

Commenting on the *Vedānta-sūtra*, Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa raises an obvious question: are devotees free from *prārabdha* karma? We do, after all, see devotees suffer. He answers that Kṛṣṇa may allow *prārabdha* karma to continue in a devotee's life according to His own desire, deciding which *prārabdha* will act and which will not. For an ordinary person, *prārabdha* karma flows like a river; in the case of a devotee, Kṛṣṇa can intervene and regulate that flow.

One may understand it simply: our karma-book is kept by Kṛṣṇa, while the karma-book of a non-devotee remains with Yamarāja. Kṛṣṇa erases or allows *prārabdha* according to His own plan. Technically, through *nāmābhāsa*, *prārabdha* karma is transferred out of Yamarāja's book and into Kṛṣṇa's, and Kṛṣṇa decides what to do with it. According to *Vedānta-sūtra*, as one advances in *bhakti*, one's good karma is transferred to one's devotee friends, while bad karma passes to those who envy the devotee — and in this way Bhagavān frees His devotees from *aprārabdha* karma.

There remains an important warning: if one deliberately commits sin, Bhagavān will not simply absorb the consequences. He may excuse an offense once, twice, even three times, but not indefinitely. If wrongdoing is deliberate and premeditated, Bhagavān will not interfere to shield the offender from its results; but if something wrong happens unintentionally, He can arrange the karma so that the person is reformed and ultimately freed. As stated in *Bhagavad-gītā*:

gatir bhartā prabhuḥ sākṣī nivāsaḥ śaraṇam suhṛt

prabhavaḥ pralayaḥ sthānaṁ nidhānaṁ bījam avyayam

Bhagavad-gītā 9.18

Kṛṣṇa is the perfect leader and guide who will take us out of this world. The classic example is Kujā, a hunchbacked maidservant who, when Kṛṣṇa came to Mathurā, caught hold of His garment and thereby embarrassed Him before Balarāma and His friends. Kṛṣṇa told her that He would come to her house; He then placed His feet upon hers and lifted her chin with His hand, straightening her back. She became an extraordinarily beautiful woman — her *prārabdha* karma was destroyed. This is the power of *bhakti*; no other process can destroy *prārabdha* karma in this

way. Aṣṭāvakra, a great brahma-jñānī, could never rid himself of the eight permanent bends in his own body.

Yet Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura offers an important caution: one cannot take undue advantage of bhakti, or one becomes implicated in an offense to the holy name:

nāmno balād yasya hi pāpa-buddhir na vidyate tasya yamair hi śuddhiḥ

Because no other process can remove an offense to the holy name, a genuine devotee does not pray, "Let the holy name destroy all my karma." Rather, he prays that he is prepared to suffer karma for millions of births, so long as he may remain engaged in Kṛṣṇa's service. This leads to a deeper question: with what bhāva should a devotee take the holy name? A devotee does not ask Kṛṣṇa to free him from karma and distress in exchange for peace and happiness — Kṛṣṇa is not our servant.

Verse Five — Let My Attachment to the Holy Name Increase

agha-damana-yaśodā-nandana nanda-sūno

kamala-nayana-gopī-candra-vṛndāvanendraḥ

praṇata-karuṇa-kṛṣṇā-vity-aneka-svarūpe

tvayi mama ratir uccair vardhatām nāmadheya

Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, in his song *Harināma Tava Aneka Svarūpa*, addresses the holy name and declares that it possesses many svarūpas. Rūpa Gosvāmī reveals several of these in this verse: Agha-damana, the slayer of Aghāsura; Yaśodā-nandana, the son of Yaśodā; Nanda-sūno, the son of Nanda Mahārāja; Kamala-nayana, the lotus-eyed Lord; Gopī-candra, Kṛṣṇa who is like the moon in whose presence the white-lotus-like gopīs blossom; and Vṛndāvanendra, the king of Vṛndāvana.

The meaning of Gopī-candra is especially beautiful. The first verse of Śrī Śikṣāṣṭakam speaks of *kairava-candrikā-vitarāṇam* — white lotuses blossoming in moonlight. Similarly, the gopīs blossom in the association of the moon-like Bhagavān; hence the name Gopī-candra. Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura teaches that when devotees chant the holy name in the proper consciousness, the many names of Kṛṣṇa begin to manifest. When one chants Hare Kṛṣṇa, one automatically begins to remember Yaśodā-nandana, Kāliya-damana, Govinda, Mādhava, and so many other names. This is why the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra is called the mahā-mantra — all mantras are contained within it. If the heart is pure, chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa automatically awakens remembrance of Kṛṣṇa's various forms and līlās.

How Do We Know Whether the Heart Is Becoming Pure?

There is a practical test: when you chant, do you remember Kṛṣṇa's rūpa, guṇa, and līlā? If not, one should ask what obstacle lies within the heart — and if it cannot be identified alone, one should consult another devotee. If one never remembers Kṛṣṇa while chanting, the chanting remains dry; in an impure heart this is to be expected. In a pure heart, ānanda arises first, and within that ānanda Kṛṣṇa appears.

Before sunrise, light and warmth appear, and only then does the sun manifest in its full brilliance. Similarly, as we chant, Kṛṣṇa draws nearer to the heart. We begin to taste bliss — just as light and heat precede the sunrise — and it is within that blissful heart that Kṛṣṇa appears. Kṛṣṇa never manifests in an unhappy heart; this is why Śrīla Prabhupāda repeatedly said, "Chant and be happy." Why, after all, would Kṛṣṇa appear in a heart filled with frustration and sorrow? Bhagavad-gītā confirms this:

brahma-bhūtaḥ prasannātmā na śocati na kāṅkṣati

samaḥ sarveṣu bhūteṣu mad-bhaktiṁ labhate parām

Bhagavad-gītā 18.54

When the heart becomes blissful, prema appears, and with prema, Kṛṣṇa appears. Knowledge, too, manifests in this state:

evam prasanna-manaso bhagavad-bhakti-yogataḥ

bhagavat-tattva-vijñānaṁ mukta-saṅgasya jāyate

Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 1.2.20

The devotee's service, therefore, is to remain happy from within — yet, deep inside, a certain longing and unhappiness also remain. Both emotions exist together. Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī describes this beautifully in Caitanya-caritāmṛta: just as kesar and camphor are blended into kheer to create distinct flavors, the devotee ready for bhakti experiences unlimited happiness and longing together — a single dish carrying two flavors at once.

The Meaning of Kṛṣṇa

As described in Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Vallabha Bhaṭṭa once asked Mahāprabhu why He chanted the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra so loudly, giving the example that one should not casually take one's master's name, just as a wife does not ordinarily speak her husband's name aloud. Mahāprabhu replied that if the husband himself orders his wife to take his name, she follows that order.

Vallabha Bhaṭṭa then offered his own commentary on the name Kṛṣṇa, explaining kṛ as ākarṣaṇa and ṇa as mokṣa, along with several other meanings. Mahāprabhu replied that all of this was correct, but that He Himself knew only one meaning of Kṛṣṇa: the son of Nanda Bābā. Mahāprabhu understood that philosophically many meanings of the name could be given, but that the manifestation of Kṛṣṇa's forms directly from Kṛṣṇa's name is the ultimate meaning and the true success of life.

Rūpa Gosvāmī expresses precisely the same principle in this verse: Kṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇa's name are non-different. When we chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, we gradually realize that Kṛṣṇa is with us; one day we will see Kṛṣṇa's beautiful form within the heart and everywhere without. The uttama-bhakta sees Bhagavān everywhere through the force of prema-bhāva:

sarva-bhūteṣu yaḥ paśyed bhagavad-bhāvam ātmanaḥ

bhūtāni bhagavatya ātmany eṣa bhāgavatottamaḥ

Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 11.2.45

Mahāprabhu Himself experienced this state — seeing mountain as Govardhana Hill, and seeing the ocean as the Yamunā — the effect of prema upon His heart. Rūpa Gosvāmī therefore addresses the holy name: "O Kṛṣṇa , You have many forms. You can give us ānanda, and You can give us Yourself — Kṛṣṇa. I take shelter of You; let my ruci and rati for You increase."

Taking the holy name and developing ruci for the holy name are not the same thing. Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, in his song on nāma-ruci, explains that one should begin by simply taking the holy name and gradually rise to the stage of nāma-ruci in order to attain the ultimate perfection of life.

Verse Six — The Holy Name Is the More Merciful Form

vācyam vācakam ity udeti bhavato nāma-svarūpa-dvayam

pūrvasmāt param eva hanta karuṇam tatrāpi jānīmahe

yas tasmin vihitāparādha-nivahaḥ prāñī samantād bhaved

āsyenedam upāśya so 'pi hi sad-ānandāmbudhau majjati

In this verse, Rūpa Gosvāmī explains that Kṛṣṇa's svarūpa may be understood in two forms — vācyam, the Deity, and vācakam, Kṛṣṇa's name. Both are non-different from Kṛṣṇa, yet there is one significant difference: the Deity remains fixed in one place, while the holy name can travel anywhere in the universe — including directly into our own heart. For this reason, Bhagavān's Deity form is called acala Brahma, while Kṛṣṇa's name is called cala Brahma.

Because Kṛṣṇa can go anywhere in the form of the holy name, the holy name is, in this sense, even more merciful. Even offenses committed during Deity worship can be neutralized by chanting the holy name. This is why Śrīla Prabhupāda established the practice of chanting the holy name during āratī. The pūjārī may make some mistake while performing āratī — no one is entirely free from error — and those who witness an improper act may themselves become implicated by that sight. The remedy is kīrtana: kīrtana neutralizes everyone's offense. Deity worship should therefore always be accompanied by kīrtana.

This process is prescribed in the Pañcarātra, though according to tradition it has been lost in parts of South India. Previously, Śrī Vaiṣṇavas recited Divya Prabandham during āratī, but this practice has diminished; Vyāsātīrtha and Vādirāja likewise instituted the singing of kīrtana during āratī, and this too has largely stopped. For this reason it is said that Bhakti Siddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura remarked that Caitanya Mahāprabhu's mission had not been fully preached in South India, and that South Indians were unfortunate not to have received Mahāprabhu's message of prema, having instead become absorbed chiefly in ritual. Bhakti Siddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura therefore expressed his intention to return and preach in South India.

Verse Seven — When Every Day Becomes a Festival

If Bhagavān's name is so powerful that it can destroy prārabdha karma and give bliss, what happens to one who commits an offense against the holy name?

sūditāśrita-janārti-rāśer ramya-cid-ghana-sukha-svarūpiṇe

nāma gokula-mahotsavāya te kṛṣṇa pūrṇa-vapuṣe namo namaḥ

Rūpa Gosvāmī answers this question in the seventh verse: if someone who has taken shelter of the holy name commits an offense against the holy name, the holy name itself can forgive — if the person continues to take that very name. There is no other way. This is why the teaching associated with Padma Purāṇa holds that continuous chanting can free one from offenses to the holy name — provided that one chants without further offense, and with sambandha-jñāna, the understanding that one is a servant of Kṛṣṇa. One should not repeatedly commit offenses; one should chant in the consciousness of being Kṛṣṇa's servant.

Generally, chanting frees one from sins but not necessarily from offenses; pure chanting alone frees one from offenses. When a Vaiṣṇava does not hold on to offenses committed against him, why would the holy name not forgive? Kṛṣṇa Himself forgave Bhṛgu Muni when Bhṛgu kicked Him upon the chest. Kṛṣṇa readily forgives offenses committed against Himself — but offenses committed against Vaiṣṇavas are treated far more seriously. Sādhū-nindā, the criticism of a devotee, is a grave nāmāparādhā, and the holy name cannot free one from it unless one seeks forgiveness from the sādhu and serves him.

Seeking forgiveness is extremely difficult in this world, for ahaṅkāra will not allow us to admit our error — especially when we believe ourselves to be correct. Even accepting our own mistake is difficult. Yet by the strength of the holy name, a Vaiṣṇava learns to bow even when he is in the right, knowing this profound principle: the one who bends before Kṛṣṇa is lifted by Kṛṣṇa; and if we refuse to bend, Kṛṣṇa will make us bend.

The Holy Name Makes Every Day a Festival

The holy name also grants intense bliss — ramya-cid-ghana-sukha-svarūpiṇe — making one forget the happiness of the material world, so that every day becomes a festival. As described in Brahma-saṁhitā, for one connected with the holy name, every day is a festival, every step becomes a dance, and every word becomes a song. Material distress may still arise, but it no longer touches the ātmā in the same way; one deals with distress without allowing it to destroy one's inner happiness.

One remains internally joyful, and in that joyful heart Kṛṣṇa's form manifests — kṛṣṇa pūrṇa-vapuṣe namo namaḥ. One then beholds, through the eyes of the ātmā, the beauty of Kṛṣṇa

constantly: His beautiful eyes, lips, flute, chest, feet, and form remain ever before one's inner vision. As Kṛṣṇa promises in Bhagavad-gītā 9.31, His devotee is never lost to Him, nor is He ever lost to His devotee.

In this verse, Rūpa Gosvāmī summarizes four sequential effects of proper chanting of the holy name:

1. It frees one from sins and offenses.
2. It brings happiness to the heart.
3. It brings bhakti-rasa.
4. It manifests Kṛṣṇa 's form within the heart.

This is the order in which these effects unfold through proper chanting of the holy name.

Verse Eight — The Sweetest Nectar of All

nārada-viñojjīvana-sudhormi-niryāsa-mādhurī-pūra

tvaṁ kṛṣṇa-nāma kāmam sphura me rasanā-rasena sadā

Śrīla Prabhupāda quoted this final verse while commenting on Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura's song Nārada Muni Bhajāya Viñā, which is itself based upon it. Rūpa Gosvāmī says that Nārada Muni constantly takes Kṛṣṇa's name to the accompaniment of his viñā, and that, gradually, even Śiva and Brahmā join him.

The holy name is the sweetest of the sweet, the very essence of nectar. Rūpa Gosvāmī therefore prays to the holy name to manifest upon his tongue, for the holy name alone is expert at drawing rasa out of naam itself — making every single step full of taste, svādu svādu pade pade.

When one takes the holy name, one develops the capacity to taste rasa at every moment — from this material world, from Bhagavad-gītā, from Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, and from everything connected with Kṛṣṇa. One becomes rasamaya. This is the very aim of life: ānanda-mayo 'bhyāsāt. Śrīla Prabhupāda said that the aim of life should be to enjoy in the association of Kṛṣṇa, and he advised that Nāmāṣṭakam be read daily, praying to the holy name to grant these realizations.

Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura expresses the same conclusion in his own words:

nāma binā kichu nāhiko āro, caudda-bhuvana-mājhe

In the entire fourteen planetary systems of this material world, there is nothing more valuable than the holy name.

And it is here that the journey of Nāmāṣṭakam ultimately arrives — from the recognition of the power of the holy name, through the challenge to impersonalism, through the assurance that no soul is disqualified, through the promise that even prārabdha karma may be dissolved, to the realization of the holy name's sweetness, its mercy, its rasa, and, at the very last, to Kṛṣṇa Himself.



Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare
Hare Rāma Hare Rāma Rāma Rāma Hare Hare